

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL DONALD BACON, CHIEF OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ SUBJECT: RECENT OPERATIONS IN IRAQ MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:15 A.M. EST DATE: WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2008

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MR. HOLT: With us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable we've got Colonel Donald J. Bacon, who is the chief of special operations and intelligence information, Strategic Communications at Multi-national Force Iraq. Colonel Bacon, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable, sir.

COL. BACON: Thank you very much. What I want to do today is give you some more information on the release that we did today of the two videos. I'll give you a little background -- more details on those operations. I'll give you a chance to ask questions. First of all, for background or just for your own information, leading up to this we've seen in the past month al Qaeda using more teenagers or -- (inaudible) -- we had two 15-year-old boys that were used in suicide operations or a suicide bomb attack in Iraq here January. We also saw just on the 1st of February two women that were used in suicide bomb attacks here in Baghdad and the investigation of that with Iraqis -- sorry, go ahead.

MR. HOLT: No -- go ahead.

COL. BACON: I thought somebody -- okay. I thought somebody was saying something. The Iraqis along with our folks in the MND Baghdad are digging into that. It shows that these ladies were both -- women were both teenagers and both had Down syndrome, and they know that primarily from that they were regulars in both of these markets. The people knew them. They saw them come in. And we also were able to identify the remains after the bombing and know who they were. So just a little bit of background with what I'm going to be telling you about these two videos.

On the 28th of January, the Iraqi counter terrorist group, working off of information from locals in Kirkuk, raided a home where they were believed to be a kidnapping ring. They did have some minimal support with the coalition forces in this operation. When they went to the home they encountered one of the al Qaeda operatives -- was part of the kidnapping ring, put him to the side. Going through the house they found four more of these folks who were involved in the kidnapping ring. They also found an 11-year-old boy who was being held captive. This is all on video and it was released today. They rescued the boy, put him in their vehicle, and as they drive off they give the cell phone to him and put his mom on the phone. You can hear him talking to his mom -- heartwarming when you listen to it and able to hear the audio. They take him to the house and you see the mom and dad run out and greet him.

And then what we've learned later talking to the parents he had been kidnapped three days earlier. The father was a mechanic, and he was being ransomed for \$100,000. And initially he told the kidnapping ring that there was just no way he could pay that \$100,000, and they came back and said, "Well, we'll let you off for \$80,000 and if you don't pay that we will behead your son and put his head in the trashcan in front of your house." And that's where he was at because he didn't have the ability to pay the \$80,000 as well, and as you can well imagine the parents of this son were so relieved to get their kid back and grateful.

What we've learned from that operation gave us more intelligence for another area where this ring was operating at so on the 3rd of February coalition forces this time went in and raided this home, and in there they found three more members who were part of this ring as well as another child that was being held captive, and we were able to get that child back to his parents as well that very day. Doing the debriefing of these eight individuals that were detained as well as going through the records that they keep, one thing we've learned is al Qaeda -- they keep pretty good records on all this stuff -- tracking their operations, money, and so forth. We learned that part of these too that -- this ring had been part of 26 separate kidnappings. So that's the background on this and I could give you more information when we do the Q and A.

The second tape that we released today involved a video that we captured on four -- or videos that we captured on 4 December. The background for this operation was that our coalition forces had intelligence information that an al Qaeda ring or al Qaeda network was operating in the area of Kahnbanisad. We had some specific coordinates and a location to go to. We went after this al Qaeda group. It was an individual in particular and some of his associates that we were trying to target. We got there. We found five members. There was an engagement and we were able to capture three, and two of the al Qaeda were killed in that engagement.

Going through that home and the -- (inaudible) -- in that area we found a lot of different papers, some propaganda, lots of DVDs and videos, and going through them a lot of them were standard -- the standard propaganda that we find but some of them were -- stuck out and we wanted to just -- they were very poignant and we wanted to get those released and give you a little bit of our characterization and assessment of it. There were five videos in particular that I want to highlight here and they detailed the training that they were giving approximately 20 Iraqi youth. They were teaching these 20 young Iraqis -- most of them looked around 11 years old we estimated -- some younger, some a little older -- they were training them on conducting kidnapping operations, how to get people forcibly out of a car, how to stop them if they ride by on a bike, how to raid a house and take control of a home, how to cross fences. They were carrying RPGs, grenades, machine guns, pistols -- those kinds of -- sort of the weapons in these videos.

What we did today is we took a composite of all five of those videos and, you know, put one three-minute and 30-second segment and released that to the public. What we think this video really was wasn't so much training these youth to go right into some kind of engagement the next week or the following week. We see it more as an indoctrination, training these youth to -- that someday they're going to be al Qaeda terrorists and, you know, through that kind of indoctrination and long-term training, desensitizing them for the future. But also these videos were taken, we think, to show other youth and to interest them in the future operations of al Qaeda or becoming future members of al

Qaeda. We do see in there that they were swearing oaths to al Qaeda in Iraq so it was clearly an al Qaeda thing. Of course, we were targeting al Qaeda member when we got there so that didn't surprise us but there -- (inaudible) -- question how do you know this is al Qaeda. Well, they were swearing oath and that's what we were targeting. Essentially, it just points out what al Qaeda's doing, what the youth -- what they're trying to do -- you know, where they can poison the next generation and preparing them for the next cycle of violence. That's sort of a rough summary that I want to give you on that. I will stop my comments with that and try my best to take your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much, and gentlemen, I'd like to mention to you also that when it comes your time to state your full name and your publication. I thank you very much. And Jarred, you were first on line so why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you, sir. Lieutenant Jarred Fishman with the Air Force Pundit. First off, just a procedural -- is that going to be the videos, which are quite outstanding -- is that going to be released to like Fox News -- to the different news channels so that the American public --

COL. BACON: We did today -- yes.

Q Okay. So we should start to see that then in the general media?

COL. BACON: Right. You will see them. They're on the MNFI site. It allows news media to access them. We did release them today. In fact, Fox has already played it one time.

Q Okay -- excellent. And then the second point being how do we then utilize this as far as our STRATCOM and our counter intel and our -- not propaganda in a pejorative sense but those kind of getting out the word about this is what al Qaeda does versus this is what we do?

COL. BACON: Several answers or several parts of that answer. First of all, the folks that do work those various components of Strategic Communications have this information.

Of course, I work in the public affairs side of that and we did a press conference today right before I called. We had media -- all the major media. We had lots of Iraqi media and Pan-Arab media. I will tell you that Al Arabiya has already run this video, for example. We know Fox -- we know CNN is doing some more background. I think they may have already come out in the last hour for all I know. I know it was in USA Today. It's on their website already with the video loaded.

But it's, you know, it's -- so it's important to not only have watched it but really want to make sure the Iraqi media has it. We gave them full access. We know that the spokesman for the MOD of Iraq is working hard to explain what these videos are about to the Iraqi media, and we'll just -- hopefully we'll get a good coverage on it. All we can do is present the facts. We found these videos. We give it to them, give them our assessment, and hopefully we'll get good coverage on that. But it is important for the Iraqis -- (inaudible) -- also Pan-Arab and Western citizens to know the nature of al Qaeda.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much. And Richard Miller?

Q Yes. Hi, good morning, Colonel. Richard Miller, Talk Radio News.

COL. BACON: Good morning.

Q Colonel, this is a comment disguised as a question. When the story broke about the two women with Down syndrome who apparently were according to the first account remotely detonated, there were some doubting Thomases -- war critics -- who questioned this, starting with Juan Cole. And I'm wondering given the fact that you guys have corroborated very specifically who they were and what some of their issues were why there wasn't better execution in terms of getting that information out. I don't know if you folks ran DNA tests or whatever was done to confirm it, but these kinds of horrific instances I think are gripping in ways that sort of rise above the usual, you know, bleed-lead stories coming out of Baghdad, and just take that as a question.

COL. BACON: Uh-huh. Well, I -- first of all, we wanted to be (comfortable to confirm ?) and to give it our own little review. The Iraqis came out that day -- the Iraqi government -- and of course they were debriefing the people in the area and they say, "Yeah, we know these ladies," and so they went out with it fairly quickly. We wanted more time to verify. I personally wasn't part of that investigation as you can well imagine but General Hammond or the MND Baghdad subsequently came out saying he felt very confident that these women had Down syndrome from his review and having the people working, you know, his soldiers in Baghdad there -- folks working that problem. So when he came out with it and saying that he had enough evidence to say that yes, he agrees we pushed -- we've been trying to tell that story too.

Q All right. Yeah, because I would hope in the future -- not that there should be a future for this kind of thing but inevitably there may be -- that this will be pushed as a priority on the news cycle because this is -- this more than almost anything else tends to label the opposition.

COL. BACON: We came out with it today in our press conference. We led off with it, just to let you know. But -- (inaudible) -- be honest with you we wanted to make sure that we had enough confidence too. What -- last thing you want to do is cry wolf and find out that it wasn't the case. We took a few days to make sure that we had our information -- that the information corroborated, and as I mentioned Admiral Smith today led off at the press conference discussing that.

Q All right -- very good. Thank you, sir. Appreciate that.

COL. BACON: You're welcome. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Charlie Quidnunc?

Q Yes, thank you. This is Charlie Quidnunc with the Wizbang Podcast. Can you go over a little bit more detail about how we know that those kidnapers were al Qaeda and not just random criminals?

COL. BACON: It was primarily based off intelligence that led us there to begin with. We had intelligence that there was a kidnapping ring that gave -- that the ransom earned was going to al Qaeda and that's -- and I've asked for verification from the folks who worked that up at MND North, which -- you're probably not familiar with our divisions but it's our division up north -- and I received the verification that this was an al Qaeda ring and not a criminal

ring. I asked that exact question because we needed to know before we came out with, you know, this is a -- you know, in our press. So right now what I can tell you is the intelligence led us there and the folks that are working the investigation. We have the -- we have eight people in custody and the information that they're giving us corroborates that as well.

Q So you're saying they're saying that they're al Qaeda?

COL. BACON: That's correct. And I always caveat it by saying I personally haven't talked to them but that's the information I am getting from the folks who have these and who had the intelligence to begin with.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Griff?

COL. BACON: I will first of all also acknowledge your point though that there are folks out there who do kidnapping and extortion that are not -- you know, they're criminals -- part of criminal gangs. So we wanted to make sure that we had the story right before we came out with it. So I respect, you know, the premise of your question. There are folks out there doing criminal things like this as well and we wanted to make sure that we distinguished and that we knew before we came out with it.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q All right. Colonel, it's Griff Jenkins, Fox News Channel and blogger. It occurs to me that you're probably proud of the Iraqi special operations forces and that a lot of what you do as the head of our own special operations chief (sic) is to train these guys, and so I just wanted to verify that that seems to be the main focus of your mission and is it what you expect your forces to be doing kind of from today on?

COL. BACON: Well, part of my mission is to know what our special forces are doing and where I can to be able to get that made available to the public. As you can understand -- (inaudible) -- we always can't because sometimes you got to protect the mission that we're doing tomorrow or the next week, but where we can we want to be able to share what's going on here so I work that end of the press chain, if you will.

But you're right -- the Iraqi special forces are doing a lot of work here and I will tell you that the leadership here brags on them a lot. They're very professional. We do -- we have worked with them in a training capacity and their special forces not only up north -- they're doing great things down south of Baghdad, in Baghdad. I've also read some of the operations that they're involved with out in Anbar. They're a very elite group, well trained, and you get very high compliments.

Q Just a follow-up on that which is, you know, being in the political year and lots of folks talking about pulling troops out and others keeping forces there, but just in a general sense will special forces have a presence in Iraq even if the -- if a large number of conventional forces left?

COL. BACON: You know, I really can't answer that question and not because I -- well, partly because I won't -- I don't know. We'll have to see. It's a political decision by and large with -- between Iraq and our leadership back home. My best guess is that you will see a presence here for a while but, you know, that's just a best guess. Obviously our leadership and the Iraqi government have to come to terms with that. That's a big part of the

discussions right now is the Iraqi government and our government starting to talk about our future partnership and relationship, and I think those talks will begin some time later this month.

Q Okay -- great. I appreciate that and I didn't intend to ask you a question you couldn't answer. I guess I meant, you know, there's this perception that what you guys do is all Jack Bauer-based and I think what we see today is successes of your training the Iraqi forces, particularly the Iraqi special operations forces. And so I was asking, you know, would we continue to train there and would you have a role in it.

COL. BACON: I would assume that we will. You know, of course, I just -- I know some of that will be determined by our leaders and Iraqi leaders and, you know, it's hard for me to forecast how that would be. But I think the likelihood is high that we'll have our presence there working with their special forces and our own special forces to track and target, you know, al Qaeda as necessary.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Richard Lowry?

Q This is Richard Lowry with op-for.com.

COL. BACON: Hello again.

Q Hello. To follow-on on what we were just talking about, you know, it's General Petraeus' intent to go from leading to partnering to overwatch. What was the participation of American forces in the kidnap rescue?

COL. BACON: I'm sorry -- say again.

Q What was the --

COL. BACON: I apologize.

Q What was the participation of American forces in the kidnap rescue?

COL. BACON: Very much more in the background -- more of an advisor role.

Q So overwatch?

COL. BACON: Correct.

Q So we're actually moving toward letting the Iraqis stand up and do most of the operation?

COL. BACON: Well, you'll see a blend of things. Some units you'll see more of a proactive presence with the U.S. and other units are very independent and -- but in this case we had minimal -- we had some U.S. advisors as part of that operation.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: I had a couple other folks chime in here. Who else is with us this morning?

Q Spencer Ackerman from the Washington Independent. Sorry I joined the call late.

MR. HOLT: Not a problem. Spencer, do you have a question? Go ahead.

Q Yeah. Colonel, I apologize for -- I wasn't able to load the videos that the -- (inaudible) -- guys kindly sent but --

COL. BACON: Hopefully they'll be able to help you out with that because they're fairly -- I think they're strong videos to watch. Q I was able to read kind of the descriptions of them and see the Power Point. Isn't it correct that using child soldiers is a war crime?

COL. BACON: I'd have to ask our lawyers. It makes sense to me. It's morally wrong -- I know that much.

Q Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And did anyone else join us? All right. We got just a few more minutes left here. Do we have any follow-up questions?

Q This is Richard Lowry again. About the video of the children being trained -- isn't that symptomatic of al Qaeda being in trouble or do they do this all the time?

COL. BACON: Well, we have evidence of them using children for spotters, observers. We don't have a lot of evidence of them using as actual fighters especially the 11- and 12-year-old. But, you know, I say that and we have, you know, just this past month -- or I should say January -- two 15-year-old boys used as suicide bombers. So we're seeing a little more of it I would say and it's a turn that we're, you know, watching closely, I guess -- we're concerned about. We do see a lot of propaganda involving children -- lots of it, you know, where they're saying chants and they're clearly marketing it as propaganda. Those particular videos though were not so much targeted for propaganda, we think. It was more to get these children thinking -- like I say, it factored in with al Qaeda training and thoughts but to use those videos for other -- for training other children. So I think it was more in a training (niche ?) versus a propaganda niche, if that makes sense.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And anyone else?

Q I've got a follow-up then, sir. Could you talk about -- two-parter -- other things that you see on the horizon that you guys are working on and that you'd like the people in America to know about, and also could you restate -- I didn't hear -- have we been able to find these kids and -- that are actually in the videos -- to be able to track them down and put them into -- I know that we run different training programs for children that are in the jails throughout -- that we've already heard about that -- throughout Iraq. So if you could speak to those issues.

COL. BACON: We don't know who those children are. They were hooded throughout the whole video. We do think the video was filmed in the southern Diyala area and it was -- and a lot of -- some of the film clearly was filmed in the summer -- I don't know if all of it was filmed in the summer so it could

have been earlier, maybe some later -- but that it was also during the time where we were doing our surge and going into these areas. So we think a lot of these areas where maybe they have more freedom to do the taping and doing these kind of things -- (inaudible) -- probably they're having less freedom to do that now. So going a long way to answer your question we don't have these -- (inaudible). At least we don't know that we do. We haven't been able to identify them.

However, we are probably operating in the areas that they were in now because of the surge so I don't think they have that kind of freedom of action that they had when this video was taken. To answer your question on the things that we're working on right now, trying to think of -- I got quite a few projects that I -- what I typically do is I get them in a more security -- from the security folks and I have to get them cleared for release so a lot of these things I'm in the process of working on. So I am working on a few things but nothing I can really put out right at the moment.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir. Well, we'll be looking for the opportunity when you are able. Anything else? Anyone else?

Q I got a quick one -- it's Griff again -- because no one's asked it. Colonel, the special forces -- you guys are working awfully hard. What's the morale? What's the temperature out there?

COL. BACON: Well, the few special forces that I know of have very good morale. A caveat to that -- because I think we have folks that are deployed for long periods of time you get the good days and bad days. I would also say that you get some good days and bad days if your unit has taken a loss. But I think that in general the morale is high because we see progress. You know, the violence levels overall have -- are down. Today, in fact, I can't remember the exact number but the total number of terrorist attacks were in -- well, is very low and we're seeing just overall good trends even though we have had the periodic suicide bus bombers and those things that -- (inaudible) -- but we're -- (inaudible) -- we're seeing positive trends. We see -- been seeing it ever since the surge began this, you know, early summer and I think folks are seeing progress. That's always good for morale when you see progress ongoing.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Well, Colonel Bacon, thank you very much for joining us today for the Bloggers Roundtable. We do appreciate it, and we look forward to speaking with you again.

COL. BACON: Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

COL. BACON: Have a good day.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thanks. END.